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Jakub Hrůša conducts Mahler 7 Thursday 13 November 2025 Royal Festival Hall



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Welcome to this evening's concert



Jakub Hrůša conducts Mahler 7

Thursday 13 November 2025, 7.30pm Southbank Centre's Royal Festival Hall

Jakub Hrůša – conductor

MAHLER Symphony No. 7 (77 mins)

This performance finishes at approximately 8.50pm

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In a nutshell...

Mahler's symphonies are woven into the Philharmonia's story – the orchestra has performed them throughout its 80 years, earning a reputation as "London's Mahlerian orchestra par excellence" (Bachtrack).

Tonight, conductor Jakub Hrůša leads the Seventh Symphony, one of Mahler's most imaginative works. Known as the 'Song of the Night', it moves from shadow to sunlight, mixing the sounds of the natural world and everyday life – cowbells, bird calls, marching bands and even a mandolin into a vast, radiant musical tapestry.

For Hrůša, Mahler's music embraces "all possible worlds of sound, meanings and genres, as if each symphony was a universe... everyone can find a link to Mahler."



Tonight's concert is being broadcast live on BBC Radio 3. It will be available on BBC Sounds for 30 days

Philharmonia Social

Philharmonia Social is our new initiative to help everyone feel welcome at our concerts.

Our staff, players and volunteers will be in the Clore Ballroom before and after the concert.

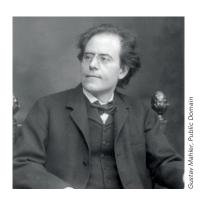
6.30pm: a short introduction to the orchestra and this evening's performance

6.45pm: your chance to join the conversation, ask questions and connect with your fellow audience members.

0800 652 6717

Programme notes





Gustav Mahler (1860 – 1911)

Symphony No. 7 (1906) (77 mins)

I. Langsam (Adagio). Allegro con fuoco II. Nachtmusik. Allegro Moderato III. Scherzo. Schattenhaft IV. Nachtmusik. Andante amoroso V. Rondo-Finale. Allegro ordinario

This was the last of the purely instrumental symphonies Mahler composed before returning to the use of choral and solo voices in the massive Eighth Symphony. It remains one of his least known and perhaps his least understood. Various commentators have interpreted it as concerned in some way with ideas of the night – most obviously because the two serenades that form the second and fourth movements were designated by the composer as 'Night music', but also because the *Scherzo* was

given the marking Schattenhaft (shadowy, or ghostly) and Mahler talked about the *Finale* in terms of the brightness of sunlight.

Alma suggested that her husband was thinking of the poetry of Eichendorff when he composed the fourth movement, a writer whose work is suffused with nocturnal landscapes evoked through sound rather than imagery. This intriguing comment suggests a wider frame of reference for the symphony as a whole.

Mahler was fascinated by the fairytale, the world of make-believe, the child's vision of the world, finding in naiveté a kind of truth that he often sought to express in his own music. His early attempts at operas were based on fairytale stories. He had no time for realism in opera, and one of his favourite works was Humperdinck's Hänsel und Gretel, which he conducted many times. His early songs and symphonies were shaped by his settings of the folk poetry of Des Knaben Wunderhorn, a collection of rhymes that evoke a world as seen in a child's picture book.

Unsurprisingly, he found himself out of step with the kind of modernism represented by Richard Strauss. While his contemporaries set modern poetry, Mahler's favourite authors were German romantics from nearly a century earlier – Jean Paul Richter and ETA Hoffmann.

Why is this relevant? Because, over and again, Mahler's Seventh Symphony seems to work like a fairytale and exhibits the same kind of unpredictable twists and

turns in its unfolding as are found in the stories of his favourite authors. In the Seventh he seems concerned with the same fantastical landscapes and characters, forever crossing a blurred boundary between the real and the imaginary.

This is not to say that Mahler's symphony is based on any particular story, just that it works like them and evokes a similar atmosphere. Above all, it deploys the central romantic category of humour, constantly pulling the carpet from under our feet and presenting something one moment, only for it to turn out to be quite another thing in the next.

The result is a symphony that is often characterised by interruption and non sequitur. It makes for some of Mahler's most modernist music, but whose unpredictable logic has its roots in romantic fiction.

None of this is much in evidence at the start of the first movement, which seems to pick up where the end of the Sixth Symphony left off, in funereal mood. Over the sombre rhythmic accompaniment of the orchestra, a tenor horn enters with a strangely angular theme. Even the tone of the instrument sounds strange in this context, imported into the orchestra from the brass band.

The slow march eventually gives way to a much more energetic one in which the dark orchestral colours of the opening are replaced by brighter sounds. As in the Sixth, a march theme is contrasted with a more lyrical second theme, the two often interrupting each other without obvious preparation. This opposition is itself interrupted by a passage in which the violins of the orchestra deliver a kind of vocal line – its melodic phrases are marked by little pauses, turn figures and obvious 'breaths'.

The march material returns periodically in this movement, unrelenting and insistent, a kind of treadmill that Mahler cannot manage to get off. Various attempts are made to divert it and take the music somewhere else. The most effective is a passage that suspends the forward movement of the march (rather like the pastoral episode in the first movement of the Sixth).

Here, the music approaches some mysterious threshold; a trumpet sounds a quiet fanfare, anticipating a moment of resolution but one outside of the main timeframe of the piece (motifs built on superimposed fourths give this passage a particularly 'extraterrestrial' atmosphere). The threshold does indeed deliver the promised breakthrough – a sudden luminous moment of lyricism, but delivered pianissimo, the glimpse of a vision still distant. Its move towards a firm resolution is cut off by a return of the darkly portentous tone of the opening.



In a conventional symphonic first movement, this moment of recapitulation, with its return to the main key and opening theme, is a powerfully affirmative gesture - a point of arrival after the drama of the development.

But Mahler inverts this effect and creates its exact opposite: the reconciliation glimpsed in the preceding passage is cut off by the negativity of the return to the opening material. In place of the fullness imaged a moment earlier, Mahler returns us to the emptiness of the opening bars.

The drama begins again with the march theme attempting to forge some progress. And so it does, culminating in the grand, though decidedly forceful gestures of the closing section. The last five bars break through to the major key, but self-consciously so, as if aware of the conventional nature of their happy ending.

The first Nachtmusik begins and ends with the sounds of nature: a horn call. sent out across the valley, is answered by a second and chattering woodwind lines evoke a sense of the self-sufficient burbling of nature. As the movement proceeds, the sounds of nature are mixed up with the human world; passages of serenade music emerge from this landscape, but mingled with the sound of cowbells

It is one of Mahler's richest but most delicate patchworks, a coming together of disparate elements that, in the dark, one can never quite identify. It has aspects of

operatic scene painting about it, but its closest analogy might be found in one of the fantastic nocturnal landscapes described in the novels of Jean Paul.

If the second movement evokes a country nocturne, the third is decidedly urban. Among its assemblage of disconnected city sounds are a collection of waltz fragments in which the melody is separated from its accompaniment figures and dissolved into ungraspable scurrying figures.

Mahler foregrounds instruments not normally given melodic prominence – the tuba, the double bass, the contra-bassoon and a solo viola. His orchestration, like a kaleidoscope, breaks the material down into constantly changing colours and shapes; it comes together, builds up momentum and then collapses, only to start again. This movement is one of the most modern Mahler ever wrote: it shares with Berg's Three Pieces for Orchestra the sense of a Viennese world viewed on the brink of its own collapse.

The fourth movement, the second Nachtmusik, frames itself as a Serenade in its opening few bars. A deliberately sentimental phrase in the solo violin introduces the little serenade band, a group of wind instruments accompanied by guitar, harp and mandolin. While the mandolin looks ahead to the orientalism of Das Lied von der Erde, the guitar anticipates Berg's use of it for his tavern band in Wozzeck.

It is perhaps in this movement that the fairytale tone of the Seventh is most prominent. Mahler uses the familiar to create something that is both nostalgic and disconcerting, but always done with great lightness of touch. It is a world apart both from the grim drama of the Sixth Symphony and the monumentalism of the Eighth.

The Rondo-Finale opens in rumbustious fashion, with a flurry of fanfare figures in the timpani and brass. The opening has often been heard as a thinly veiled reference to the overture to Wagner's opera Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg, with which it shares a diatonic C major tonality, a rich contrapuntal texture and a sense of collective festival. But, unlike Wagner's overture, Mahler's opening is interrupted and its festivities cut short.

To be sure, the interruption is only temporary, but it happens again and again. Indeed, the whole movement is characterised by powerfully energetic passages suddenly sidestepped by non sequiturs. One section ends abruptly as another starts, but always at a tangent to the preceding one.

The result is a sense of tremendous plurality as if, to continue the Wagner reference, many different groups of people are all converging upon the same place. The plurality is only just held together by the rondo returns of the opening fanfare material.

Mahler, an opera conductor for his whole life, was a master of the theatrical gesture. This symphony is full of framing devices that are then subverted by what follows, throwing undue attention onto the frames themselves rather than the main material.

When the closing section ushers in an apparently triumphal tolling of bells and pealing out of the brass in bright C major fanfares, it is hard to tell whether Mahler is being entirely serious. The fairytale mode lingers even here; the grand gestures suggest joy and affirmation, but the little twist, in the penultimate bar of the whole symphony, suggests you cannot be quite sure.

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Get to know Jakub Hrůša

Philharmonia 1/





What draws you personally to Mahler's Symphony No. 7?

The Seventh was one of the last Mahler symphonies I discovered as a conductor. My journey began with the Third, then the First, and I soon jumped to the Ninth, which I now feel closest to.

The Seventh attracted me for its enigmatic nature. I try to embrace its experimentalism and give it coherence. It was premiered in Prague by a mixed orchestra, including musicians from the German Theatre, due to the Czech Philharmonic's limited personnel. That history resonates with me, as the Bamberg Symphony, which I lead, descends from that tradition. Our *United by Mahler* concert with the Czech Philharmonic in Prague was a powerful artistic and cultural experience, showing how close we are despite language differences.

You've spoken about Mahler's ability to "embrace all possible worlds of sound." How do you approach bringing that to life with the Philharmonia?

In every imaginable way. But the main thing is our mutual trust, built over years of wonderful creative collaboration.

How does your idea of engaging with the past - not imitating it - affect how you interpret Mahler's Seventh Symphony?

To tell the truth, I try to be authentic and not to pretend anything. I think that's enough - after all, I myself (like all my colleagues) am a living, that is, a contemporary person, not someone from the past.

What does it mean to you to conduct Mahler 7 as part of the Philharmonia's 80th anniversary season?

It is a great honour, and I value it deeply. Every time I have the opportunity to conduct such masterpieces, I feel privileged and happy.

What three things are you listening to at the moment?

Dvořák's The Wild Dove. Janáček's Taras Bulba and Britten's Peter Grimes.

Founded in 1945, the Philharmonia Orchestra Celebrates its 80th birthday in the 2025/26 season.

About the Philharmonia

Conductor Santtu-Matias Rouvali took up the baton as Principal Conductor in 2021, and Marin Alsop joined him as Principal Guest Conductor in 2023.

They follow in illustrious footsteps: Herbert von Karajan, Otto Klemperer, Riccardo Muti, Giuseppe Sinopoli, Christoph von Dohnányi, Vladimir Ashkenazy and Esa-Pekka Salonen are some of the key conductors who have shaped the Philharmonia's reputation as one of the world's great orchestras.

The Philharmonia has premiered music by composers including Richard Strauss, Sir Peter Maxwell Davies and Errollyn Wallen and performs with many of the world's most admired soloists. Víkingur Ólafsson is this season's Featured Artist, and Gabriela Ortiz is Featured Composer.

Resident at the Southbank Centre since 1995, the Philharmonia also holds residencies in Basingstoke, Bedford, Canterbury and Leicester, and tours extensively worldwide. A major US tour in October culminated in two concerts at Carnegie Hall.

The Philharmonia's 80-year recording history includes many benchmark LP's and more than 150 film and videogame soundtracks. The Orchestra's recording of Beethoven's Symphony No.5 is travelling through interstellar space on board the Voyager spacecraft, and immersive installations and virtual reality experiences introduce orchestral music to new audiences.

The Philharmonia is committed to nurturing and developing the next generation of instrumentalists and composers, with a focus on increasing diversity within the classical music industry.



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Jakub Hrůša – conductor





Born in the Czech Republic, Jakub Hrůša is Chief Conductor of the Bamberg Symphony, Music Director of The Royal Opera, Covent Garden, and Chief Conductor and Music Director Designate of the Czech Philharmonic (from 2028).

He performs regularly with the world's greatest orchestras, including the Vienna Philharmonic, Berlin Philharmonic, Bavarian Radio Symphony, Munich Philharmonic, Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, Staatskapelle Dresden, Tonhalle Orchester Zürich, Lucerne Festival Orchestra, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Orchestre de Paris, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, NHK Symphony and the Mahler Chamber Orchestra – and in the US with The Cleveland Orchestra, New York Philharmonic and Boston Symphony Orchestra.

He has led opera productions for the Lyric Opera of Chicago, Salzburg Festival, Vienna State Opera, Royal Opera House, Opéra National de Paris, and Zurich Opera. He has also been a regular guest with Glyndebourne Festival, conducting Vanessa, The Cunning Little Vixen, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Carmen, The Turn of the Screw, Don Giovanni and La bohème, and was Music Director of Glyndebourne On Tour for three years.

His relationships with leading soloists include collaborations with Behzod Abduraimov, Piotr Anderszewski, Leif Ove Andsnes, Emanuel Ax, Lisa Batiashvili, Joshua Bell, Renaud Capuçon, Gautier Capuçon, Isabelle Faust, Julia Fischer, Sol Gabetta, Christian Gerhaher, Kirill Gerstein, Karen Gomyo, Hélène Grimaud, Augustin Hadelich, Hilary Hahn, Alina Ibragimova, Steven Isserlis, Janine Jansen, Sheku Kanneh-Mason, Leonidas Kavakos, Evgeny Kissin, Patricia Kopatchinskaja, Lang Lang, Igor Levit, Albrecht Mayer, Anne-Sophie Mutter, Emmanuel Pahud, Beatrice Rana, Josef Špaček, Nikolaj Szeps-Znaider, Antoine Tamestit, Jean-Yves Thibaudet, Daniil Trifonov, Mitsuko Uchida, Lukáš Vondráček, Yuja Wang, Alisa Weilerstein, and Frank Peter Zimmermann.

As a recording artist, he was a double winner at the 2024 Gramophone Awards. With Bamberg Symphony, he received the ICMA Prize for Symphonic Music in 2022 and 2023, and the Preis der Deutschen Schallplattenkritik. His recordings have been nominated for BBC Music Magazine, Gramophone, and Grammy Awards. Hrůša is an Honorary Member of the Royal Academy of Music. He received the Bavarian Order of Merit (2025), Silver Medal of the Czech Senate (2024), Sir Charles Mackerras Prize, Bavarian Culture Prize, Antonín Dvořák Prize, and Bavarian State Prize for Music.

Hrůša is an Honorary Member of the Royal Academy of Music in London. In 2025 he received the Bavarian Order of Merit, and in 2024 he received the Silver Medal of the President of the Czech Senate, its highest award. He was the inaugural recipient of the Sir Charles Mackerras Prize, and has also been awarded the Bavarian Culture Prize, the Czech Academy of Classical Music's Antonín Dvořák Prize, and – with Bamberg Symphony – the Bavarian State Prize for Music.



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